

General Elections in Sweden 2018: The Pre-Election and Election Periods

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RESEARCH NOTES

GENERAL ELECTIONS IN SWEDEN 2018: THE PRE-ELECTION AND ELECTIONS PERIODS

BARBARA MAŠIĆ

Abstract. General elections were held in the Kingdom of Sweden on the 9th of September 2018; parliamentary (riksdagsval), municipal (landstingsval), and local elections (kommunalval). Citizens and residents of Sweden elect 349 members of parliament, county representatives from 20 counties, and representatives of municipalities within those counties, depending on the population in each unit. Since these are general elections, the results do not vary much, and the results are similar at all levels of government. This paper presents the results decided at all levels, detailing the results for the parliamentary elections. The results of this election took European and international public by surprise. The Sweden Democrats have crystallized as a third political option in Sweden, repeating an outstanding result in two cycles in a row. The success of the Swedish Democrats has tarnished the image of liberal and tolerant Sweden and its image of neutrality in the world. It remains to be seen how Swedish politics will respond to future challenges.

Keywords: *general elections; parliament; turnout; results.*

The Swedish system of government is a parliamentary democracy, albeit formally a constitutional monarchy led by King Karl Gustav XVI, who has ruled since 1973. The legislature is the Riksdag, a parliament that has 349 members who are elected every four years. Elections are always held on the second Sunday in September – the exception is the European Parliament elections, which are held every five years. After the election, the Riksdag chairman proposes a new prime minister, which is then decided by members of parliament. Approximately 7 million people are eligible to participate in the elections. Residents and Swedish citizens who have reached the age of 18 on election day can vote. Specific rules apply in municipal and county elections where, in addition to the age

requirement, it is sufficient that the voter is a national of a Member State of the European Union, Iceland and Norway and registered in the territory of a specific municipality; and if voter is a third-country national, then the condition is permanent residence for three years in the territory of a particular municipality (Riksdagen 1994, 692).

Sweden is one of the countries where local, provincial, and parliamentary elections are held at the same time (Riksdagen 2005, 837). The general elections in Sweden were first held in 1970. Electoral reform was adopted in 1968, after years of debate about the (in)expediency of the electoral system of the time. In doing so, three aspects were individually considered: the impact on voter turnout, the impact on the political responsibility of the elected, and the impact on the relationship of forces between the state and local levels. The left bloc was arguing for holding a general election by arguing that a joint election day would increase turnout and thus strengthen the link between voters and elected politicians and increase political equality among voters. The right-wing bloc, along with the Green Party, was against holding elections by arguing that each level of politics deserves its focus, and that split elections are conducive to reviving the democratic system at the local level. Subsequent to the change of the electoral system, the argument against general elections was the perception of the weakened responsibility of elected politicians during the term, and there were calls for the separation of the elections; however, later on, the attitude towards the responsibility of elected politicians had changed, and the importance of this argument had slowly declined (Dahlberg 2016). Elections in Sweden until 1994 were held every three years, and since 1994 they have been held every four years. The additional elections that citizens in Sweden attend to are the elections to the European Parliament, which are held every five years.

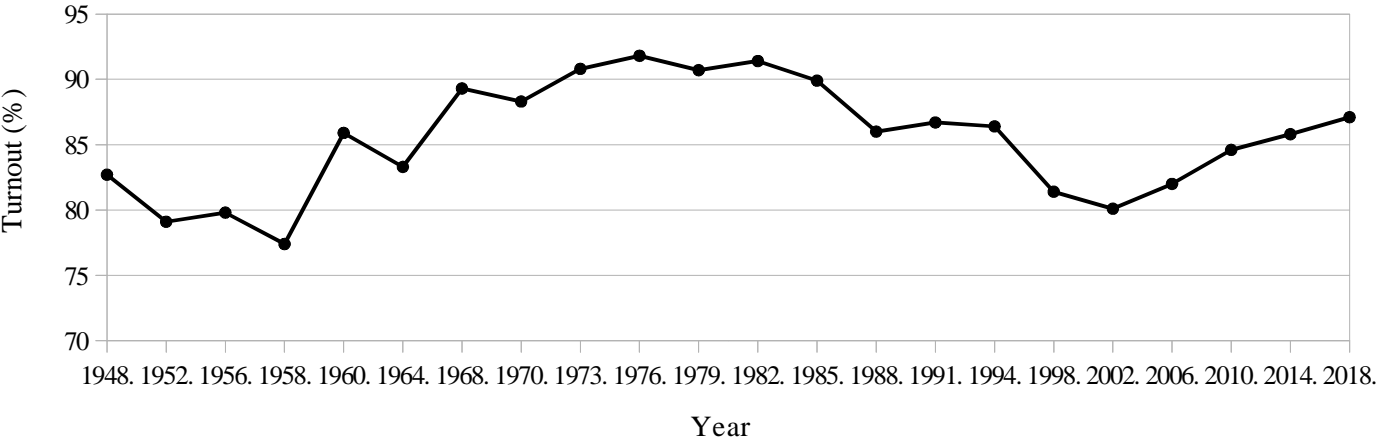
The elections in Sweden have achieved a very high turnout since the beginning of the election process. Elections from the end of World War II to the present can be taken as an example; the first post-war elections were held in 1948 with a turnout of 82.7%, after which the lowest turnout was 77.4% in the 1958 elections, while the highest turnout was in 1976 when 91.8% of voters turned out. Turnout has increased in the last four election cycles, with 87.1% of voters turnout. A

very high voter turnout is due to a responsible society, with responsible governing structures that, if turnout is down, undertake various studies to improve turnout and increase financial support for political parties during election campaigns to further encourage voters to turn out to elections (Dalhberg 2016).

The data presented in Chart 1 appears surprising for Middle-European countries; for example, in the last parliamentary elections in Croatia (2016), turnout in the parliamentary elections was 52,59%, in Czech (2017) was 60,84% (Volby.cz, 2017), in Slovakia (2016) 59,82% (Volby.statistics.sk, 2016), in Poland (2015) was 50,9% (Election Resources 2015). As can be seen from the chart, Swedish voters turn out in a much larger share. This is due to a sense of participation in government that is equally represented by all voters and responsibility for the bad political decisions of the politicians elected by the voters. Therefore, in Sweden the turnout has traditionally been high and, as can be seen, since the 2002 elections, it has been steadily increasing so that as many as 87.1% of voters turned out for the recent elections.

The high voter turnout is the reason, despite the *status quo* between the right and left parties, there is not much government change in Sweden in the midst of mandates, or early elections, because voters are very aware of who and why they chose the candidates to represent them and understand that they have elected politicians who have the right, responsibility and obligation to fulfill their mandate the best.

Chart 1. Voter turnout on the 1946 - 2018 Election



Results of the 2018 parliamentary elections

Parliamentary structure before the 2018 elections (2014 elections)

The Swedish Social Democratic Labor Party (*Sveriges socialdemokratiska arbetarparti, SAP*) or shortly, the Social Democrats (*Socialdemokraterna, S*), achieved the best result in the 2014 parliamentary elections, winning 113 seats in the parliament, one more than in the 2010 elections. Coalition formed by the Moderate Party (*Moderata samlingspartiet, M*) or abbreviated Moderates (*Moderaterna*), Central Party (*Centerpartiet, C*) or abbreviated Centrists (*Centern*), Liberal Party (*Liberalpartiet, L*) or abbreviated Liberals (*Liberalerna*) and Christian Democrats (*Kristdemokraterna, KD*) won a total of 141 seats in Parliament (Moderate Party (M) 84 seats, 23 less than in previous elections; Central Party (C) 22 seats, 1 less than in previous elections, Liberal Party (L) 19 seats, 5 less than in previous elections and Christian Democrats (KD) 16 seats, 3 less than in previous elections). Sweden Democrats (*Sverigedemokraterna, SD*) won 49 seats in parliament, 29 more than in previous elections. The Green Party (*Miljöpartiet, MP*) won the same number of seats as in the previous elections, 25, and the Left Party (*Vansterpartiet, V*) also entered the parliament, winning 21 seats, two more than in previous elections.

Such results have resulted in a parliamentary crisis that has not occurred in Sweden since 1990 since none of the parties that entered parliament could form a stable government. Specifically, the parties were divided into three entities; the left bloc, comprising the Social Democrats (S) and the Green Party (MP), had 39% of the parliamentary votes; the right bloc, consisting of the Moderate Party (M), the Central Party (C), the Liberal Party (L) and the Christian Democrats (KD), had 39.3% of the vote; and the Sweden Democrats (SD), with 12.86% of the vote so far, which was not a preferred coalition partner for any of the previous two blocs. After weeks of negotiations, the minority government was drawn up by the parties of the Left bloc, and Social Democrat (S) leader Stefan Löfven was elected prime minister.

The 2018 parliamentary elections

The 2018 elections were critical because they needed to offer an answer to the question of whether to continue the *status quo*, which, by forming and supporting the minority government, was agreed by members of parliament in a previous parliament. It is beneficial, therefore, to look at the graph and the accompanying table on what political parties have achieved in this election compared to the results achieved in the last election. As can be seen from Figure 1 and Table 1, some parties have achieved positive results and achieved much greater success than in previous elections. In absolute terms, these are Sweden Democrats (SD) who received a total of 62 seats in 2018, 13 more than in 2014. In percentage terms, the Central Party (C), the Left Party (V), and the Christian Democrats (KD) achieved better results, with about 40 percent better results than the one achieved in the 2014 elections.

The party that lost the most votes since the last election, in absolute numbers, are Social Democrats (S), who received a total of 113 votes in the 2018 elections, 13 fewer than in the 2014 elections. In percentage terms, the Party of the Greens (MP) experienced the most significant drop in votes, up 36% from the 2014 result.

Once again, it should be recalled that in Sweden, the left and right blocks have been formed for years. The left bloc included the Social Democrats (SD), the Left Party (V) and the Green Party (MP), while the right bloc comprised the Moderate Party (M), the Central Party (C), the Christian Democrats (KD) and the Liberal Party (L). The Sweden Democrats (SD) are a party that does not join any blocs because none of the blocs wants to form a coalition with them. It should be noted that pre-election coalitions are not common in Sweden, as each party wants to focus its election on its result, although it is known which party belongs to which bloc.

In conclusion, the *status quo* was further strengthened in this election, as the left bloc won a total of 40.67 percent of votes, or 144 seats in parliament, while the right bloc won a total of 38.26 percent of votes or 143 seats in parliament. no bloc has the necessary majority to form a government. Against this background, it was expected that Sweden would form a minority government again, with uncertainty as to whether anyone would lead it.

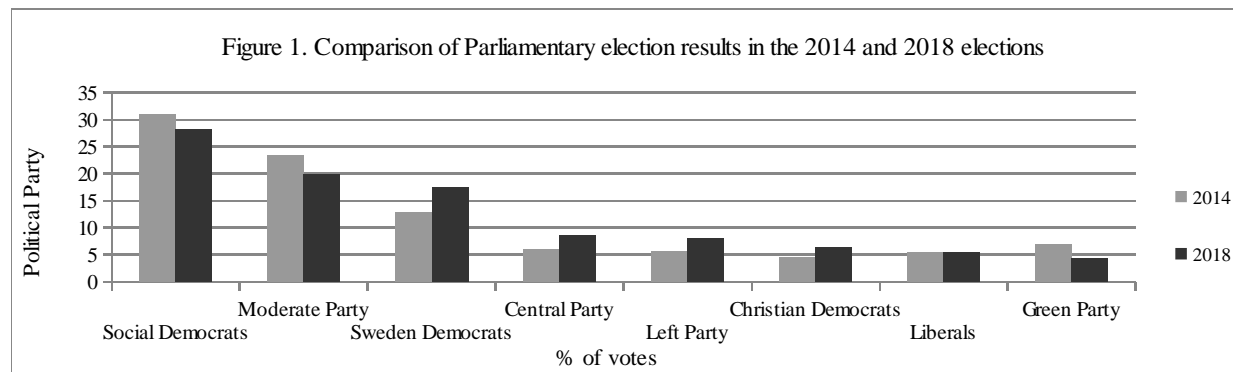


Table 1

Comparison of Parliamentary election results in the 2014 and 2018 elections

Year	2014		2018		change (%)
	% of votes	Seats	% of votes	Seats	
Social Democrats (S)	31.01	113	28.26	100	– 8.9
Moderate Party (M)	23.33	84	19.84	70	– 15.0
Sweden Democrats (SD)	12.86	49	17.53	62	36.3
Central Party (C)	6.11	22	8.61	31	40.9
Left Party (V)	5.72	21	4.57	28	39.9
Christian Democrats (KD)	4.57	16	6.32	22	38.3
Liberals (L)	5.42	19	5.49	20	1.3
Green Party (MP)	6.89	25	4.41	16	– 36.0

County and municipal level results

After the polls close, votes are first counted for parliament, then for municipal elections, and finally for county elections. Therefore, full results for municipal elections were announced two weeks after the polls closed, and are available on the Election Commission website: <https://www.val.se>.

County elections

In total, 6,544,316 voters in twenty (20) counties voted in the county elections. In Sweden, counties differ significantly in terms of the number of voters, so the one with the highest number of voters is the Stockholm county (1,460,299) and the least in the Jämtland county – 85,721. Considering the votes won in absolute numbers, the Social Democrats (S) in the Stockholm county received the most votes, 379,008 votes, or 26.23%. The Social Democrats (S) in the Västerbottens county, with 62,782 votes or 35.50%, out of 180,273 voters, achieved the best result in the percentage of votes won in a county. Looking at the results published on the official website of the Electoral Commission (Val.se, 2018), it can be observed that the results of certain parties are stable in all parts of Sweden. For example, the Social Democrats (S) achieved the best party result, in percentage, in the already-mentioned Västerbottens county, with 35.5% of the vote, while the worst result (in percentages) was achieved in the Stockholm county, 26.23% (where received the highest number of votes in absolute numbers). On the other hand, the Sweden Democrats (SD) achieved the best result (20.56% or 21,509 votes) in the county of Blekinge, and the worst in the Norrbotens county (5.96% or 9,935 votes). These results lead to the conclusion that support for this party is unequal across the country. The moderate party (M) achieved the best result in Hallands county with 23.23% and 49,715 votes, respectively, and the worst in the Norrbotens county with only 8.26% and 13,771 votes respectively. The Central Party (C) achieved the best result in the Jämtland county with 15.06% or 12,602 votes and the worst in the Norrbotens county with only 5.13% or 8,545 votes. At the level of

the whole of Sweden, the best result was achieved by the Social Democrats (S) with 1,850,724 and 28.74% of votes, while behind them, the Moderate Party (M) with 1,241,717 or 19.28% of votes won. The Sweden Democrats (SD) came in third with 828,220 or 12.86% of votes won.

Municipal elections

6,613,451 voters in 290 local constituencies voted in municipal elections. In Sweden, municipalities as well as counties, differ significantly in terms of the number of voters, so the largest number of voters was in Stockholm – 623,306 voters, and the least in the municipality of Sorsele – 1,576 voters. Analyzing the results published on the official website of the Electoral Commission, it can be seen that in the smaller units voters are strongly inclined towards a particular political party. For example, in municipalities such as Munkfors, Grums, and Överkalix the Social Democrats (S) received more than 50% of the total vote. Barbara MAŠIĆ The Central Party (C) achieved the best result, with over 40% of the total votes in the Nordmaling and Orsa units. At the level of the whole of Sweden, the best result was achieved by the Social Democrats with 1,801,843 votes, or 27.58%, followed by the Moderate Party (M) with 1,310,182 votes and 20.06%, and the Sweden Democrats (SD) with 832,083 votes, or 12.74 %. In conclusion, given the nature of the general election, it is expected that the total votes of the parties will not differ significantly with respect to the level of elections, which in this case also proved to be correct. Polarizations are possible on a smaller number of municipalities, which, given the number of voters in them, is acceptable and expected.

Instead of a conclusion: Forming a government

Prime Minister Stefan Löfven (S) and his cabinet were rejected by the parliament for the role as prime minister on September 25, 2018, with 204 votes in favor and 142 against, but he remained in the leadership of the transition government until the election of a new prime minister

(Olsson 2018). Subsequently, a further procedure for the election of the Prime Minister in the Parliament was initiated. Party negotiations began on September 27, 2018. During the negotiations, two possible candidates for the prime minister were crystallized, incumbent Stefan Löfven (S) as the candidate of the left and Henrik Kristersson (M) as the candidate of the right, conditionally. However, there was a delay in the negotiations and thus the formation of the government, because neither Löfven nor Kristersson were able to assemble the stable coalition needed to form the government.

On November 14, 2018, Kristersson was formally nominated as prime minister, but was not supported by the Central Party (C) and Liberal Party (L) members and therefore rejected for the role as prime minister because they did not want to participate in a government that potentially relies on the Sweden Democrats in the future. There were 195 votes in favor, with 154 voting against (Löfgren, 2018). It was the first time in parliament's history that the proposed candidate had not received the necessary (majority) support since 1971 when the Swedish parliament became unicameral. After that, negotiations between the parties continued but did not produce any results. Therefore, on the 12th of December 2018 Riksdag Chairman Andreas Norlén (M) nominated Löfven again as the new (old) candidate for Prime Minister. Although members of the Central Party (C) and Liberal Party (L) decided to support him in order to secure a stable coalition, negotiations failed several days before the vote because of disagreements over the budget. On the same day that Löfven was nominated for prime minister, parliament did not pass the budget proposed by the former "Social Democratic" government (led by Löfven) but endorsed the one proposed by the Moderate Party (M) and Christian Democrats (KD). Löfven was given confidence in the PM by 116 MPs, while 200 voted against it (Johnson 2018).

Norlén, after failing to gain the confidence of the parliament, said he would seek to continue negotiations between the parties, urging candidates to form a stable coalition but also pointing to the realistic possibility of calling new, snap elections. He scheduled the next Prime Ministerial vote for January 16, 2019, which was subsequently postponed until January 18, 2019 (Sverige Riksdag, 2018), and the final

vote for January 23, 2019, if the previous vote was unsuccessful. Should this vote fail on January 23, 2019, or fail to cast a prime minister, he also proposed a date for early elections, April 21, 2019. But this did not happen because on January 11, 2019, it was announced that an agreement had been reached between the Social Democrats (S), the Green Party (MP), the Central Party (C) and the Liberal Party (L) to support Löfven. Interestingly, support for the Social Democrat Löfven was given by a party that was otherwise classified in the right-wing bloc (Central Party). Löfven was finally elected on January 18, 2019, with only 115 votes, while 153 were against and 77 abstentions. Namely, in Sweden it is possible to cast confidence in the Prime Minister if the majority does not vote, which was the case, since out of 345 votes, 153 were against, or less than half of the total number of votes cast. Löfven and the new government took place on the 21st of January, before the head of state at a Council of State at the Royal Palace (Sverige Riksdag 2019). The 2018 elections in Sweden have shown that the polarization of election blocs is even stronger than in 2014. Both the left and right blocs retained existing votes, while there were minor changes in the popularity of the parties within them. Thus, the Green Party (MP) on the left, and the Moderate Party (M) on the right performed significantly worse than the last elections, while the Social Democrats (S) on the left and the Sweden Democrats (SD) on the right strengthened. This is precisely the concern of the media and the public, although it may not be a concern, but merely an indication that voters have a clear picture of certain issues that have become important in Swedish society, and thus opt for parties' programs that are unambiguous about that issues.

These were the most uncertain elections in the history of Sweden, which confirmed the growing polarization of the political spectrum but also confirmed that they did not allow any forms of extremism. Namely, as evidenced by the final results of the vote in parliament, Stefan Löfven (S) was elected by a 'narrow minority', and it remains to be seen how skilled he will be in maintaining the stability of the new Swedish government in his second term.

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